

thinkBIG

The pulse of the SME sector





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What in the world is happening?

Our world has certainly fallen on interesting times. Combinations of events that have been playing out for the past several years have left a lot of business owners frustrated, confused and worried.

We find ourselves at a point in economic and geopolitical history where vigilance and foresight are crucial. 'Waiting to see' and 'hoping for the best' must be considered for happier past times, with the current environment requiring every business owner to be prepared and proactive.

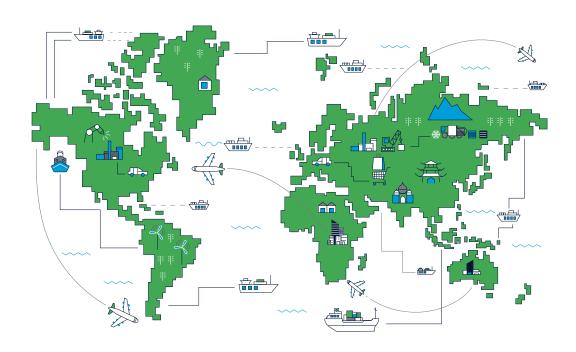
Having celebrated 102 years in business this year, RSM Australia is no stranger to the economic cycle we are in right now. While everyone loves the easy times, we excel when times get tough—drawing on our collective knowledge and decades of experience to help our clients weather the storm.

Our extensive mid-market client base gives us a good view of what has been unfolding in businesses across the country, including:

- Common business challenges.
- Sector-specific challenges.
- Essential measures for survival.

It is our privilege to share some of these insights with you in this latest thinkBIG edition.

Having worked with many troubled businesses, we have seen time and again that seeking advice and getting support sooner rather than later can make a significant difference. This report is designed to help you critically assess operations and identify potential red flags early on, so you can take proactive steps to safeguard your business's future.





It is a multi-speed economy

The situation at hand is by no means diabolical. Many of our clients are doing extremely well and even recording record earnings. Others are carrying on business—as—usual, but have put a pin in growth plans until inflation and interest rates stabilise.

On the other end of the spectrum, we are seeing an influx of clients with significant debt concerns. Although this is more prevalent in some sectors than others, no business is immune. Various external factors are driving this trend, which we will explore in the following pages. We will also share how we are assisting these business owners to regain control and determine their path forward.

Whatever situation you find yourself in now, hope is not lost and opportunities are still ripe for the taking. Regardless of media sentiment and talks of recession or even depression, it's worth remembering that millionaires are made in both good and bad times.

With that in mind, let's take a look at some of the common challenges we see affecting small to medium enterprises today...



Common business challenges

Tax debt

It can take several years to see the full effects of any economic change — be it a rise in inflation or interest rates, global instability, policy changes, or a worldwide pandemic that impacts trading for months at a time.

Particularly for businesses that were low on working capital or holding debt prior to 2020, the events that followed have either been a gift or a curse. Some were propped up with stimulus, restructured their operations, and have emerged more resilient than ever before. Others were forced to take out heavy loans, rely on amnesty from the Australian Tax Office (ATO), and do whatever they could to survive.

The amnesty provided by the ATO was unlike anything we have seen in recent history. However, with the market back in full swing, they are indeed back to business as usual and are more than a little eager to collect on the billions in tax debt they are now owed.

For Australian businesses, this eagerness is currently manifesting as:

- payment reminders
- rejected payment plans
- garnishee notices
- Director Penalty Notices
- wind up notices



Interest rates for overdue amounts have reached 11.36% as at July 2024, which is something we have not seen in more than a decade. As of 1 July 2025, any interest paid on unpaid ATO debts will not be tax deductible which will further compound the situation for struggling businesses.

While the ATO's position is understandable, their approach and seeming urgency has caught a lot of people off-guard. Even reasonable payment plans are often knocked back, leaving a lot of business owners with no other choice but to make use of the Small Business Restructuring process (which we will cover later on.)

Interest rates

It isn't only the ATO that is hurting mid-market businesses. For those with hefty business loans from banks or non-bank lenders, the steep rise in the Reserve Bank of Australia's policy rates over the past few years has been a major challenge.

The increased cost to service loans is eating into profits, and difficulty obtaining new loans is forcing some business owners to tap into personal finances to keep their businesses afloat.

Funds from investors are harder to come by, with many cutting back on investment activity due to fears of poor returns. Consumer spending has also taken a hit as homeowners grapple with mortgage repayments that are well above what they were two years ago.

When interest rates will start to decline remains uncertain, as it generally depends on inflation which has only recently begun to ease.

Inflation

The post-COVID spending flurry was exciting for businesses that had weathered painful closures during the pandemic. Demand for products and services soared, and with them so did the prices.

Although this period was highly profitable for some, others were left with diminishing gross profits due to the increased cost of materials, supplies, wages, insurance premiums and so on.

As inflation eases, we find ourselves in this most difficult pull-back period where costs remain high but demand has dwindled. As such, it's near impossible for most businesses to reduce their prices which in turn impacts customer attraction and spending.

We will hopefully see inflation move into an easing cycle as we head into 2025. This should then result in lower interest rates, increasing competition among banks, and more favourable lending conditions.

Labour shortages

Although labour shortages appear to be improving in some states and territories, they have been a significant challenge for our clients these past few years.

Despite increased migration, businesses across all sectors are struggling to find suitably skilled workers — making it difficult to maintain operations, let alone pursue growth opportunities.

Linked to this labour shortage is a fear of letting staff go despite it becoming unaffordable to retain them. Companies that might otherwise scale up or down their staff numbers in line with financial projections have instead been holding on tight. In some cases this has been beneficial, but not for a business that risks insolvency by continuing with business as usual.

Labour market conditions are expected to become more favourable for employers in coming months, so this will allow for more flexibility in terms of staff retention strategies during downsizing or expansion.

Government policies

Sadly, amidst all the stress of inflation and interest rates we're also seeing clients struggle under the weight of complex government policies.

This is occurring at both an industrial relations level and within specific sectors such as construction and healthcare.

With government policy hindering growth, and even deterring new entrants to certain fields, there is hope that future reforms and supportive measures will eventually enable a more favourable environment for innovation and expansion.

Poor business practices and lack of energy

While the external economic environment presents obstacles, the biggest challenge we see affecting businesses in all sectors is poor business practices.

This can present in many ways, such as:

- Poor cashflow management.
- Failure to keep on top of invoicing.
- A lack of timely record-keeping.
- Loss of motivation.

This last point is especially significant at present, with the effects of the past few years not only affecting people economically but also mentally and emotionally. Business owners are increasingly reporting that they feel run down and unmotivated.

Taking a break can be helpful, but if your business is struggling and you don't have the energy to turn it around then you need a plan moving forward. Not knowing what you would do otherwise is not a reason to keep a business alive.

Often, if you act sooner rather than later in these circumstances, you can achieve a positive and perhaps unexpected outcome that gives you more choices in terms of what the next steps might be.

Sector-specific challenges

Healthcare

While highly dependent on location, many healthcare businesses have been hit hard by consumer discretionary spending. This includes dentists, psychologists, alternative healthcare practitioners and even veterinarians. While less impacted, some medical centres are also mirroring this trend for consultations that aren't bulk-billed.

Bulk-billing itself has become a widespread topic of discussion. With bulk-billing rebates increasing only minimally over the past decade, medical practices have had to compensate by increasing private billing amounts. These out-of-pocket expenses are necessary to cover everything from administration wages to supplies, lease costs, insurance and so on.

This problem has been further exacerbated after several court cases laid precedents as to the distinction between a 'contractor' and an 'employee'. The precedents put the long-standing contractor model widely used within the healthcare industry in the spotlight, and forced many businesses to re-examine their practices. For those that clearly treat their practitioners or doctors like employees, payroll tax is now a significant concern.

State governments have attempted to ease this for medical practices by providing exemptions to the tax — yet it only applies if they meet certain bulk-billing thresholds. Because a bulk-billing model is simply unsustainable for most medical practices, the ability to achieve these thresholds is near impossible. This means out-of-pocket expenses will again have to increase for patients in order for clinics to maintain their existing level of patient care.

Moving forward, healthcare practices will need to prioritise efficiency, pricing strategies, and client/patient retention strategies. This will give them the best chance of survival and ensure long-term sustainability in a competitive and evolving market.

Property and construction

A combination of inflation and fixed price contracts has left the construction industry as one of the hardest hit over the past few years. Already a high–risk industry, the huge hike in material costs and labour shortages were more than even the most established companies could bear.

Those that have emerged from this period are cautiously doing well, fuelled by the growing housing crisis and a newfound appreciation for including variation clauses in contracts. Labour shortages continue to be a significant issue though, which the government is actively trying to remedy through initiatives such as subsidised apprenticeships.

As always, the biggest challenge for construction companies moving forward is financial management. While generally run by skilled tradespeople, the tendency to fall behind on quoting, invoicing and debt collection is a common cause of insolvency. Onboarding a good bookkeeper, and surrounding yourself with quality advisers, is the best way to avoid this.

In the property sector, we are unfortunately seeing a number of strata companies facing difficulties. This is attributed to rising rates of owners corporations being dissolved due to governance issues, building defects and unpaid strata fees.

Retail and hospitality

Retail and hospitality have been at the receiving end of the shift in discretionary spending, which in metro areas has compounded the lack of foot traffic resulting from people increasingly choosing to work from home.

Although popular cafés and restaurants still appear to be overflowing on weekends, most businesses in this sector are certainly seeing changes in their customer's spending habits. For example, cafés may notice that people stop in for a coffee but don't buy cake. Pubs might notice a decrease in meal orders, but an increase in bottle shop sales.

It is important to remember that these changes happen in cycles, and the trend will eventually reverse. In the meantime, creativity and customer experience must be front and centre for all businesses in this sector.

Manufacturing

Inflation has had definite impacts on the manufacturing sector, driving up the cost of materials and severely damaging the profit margins of manufacturers who are caught in fixedprice supply contracts.

Freight costs and skills shortages have also been impactful, though these do appear to be easing.

At present, manufacturers will need to be extremely diligent about their pricing strategies and operational efficiencies. There are often meaningful gains to be had in both of these

Non-profits

Another sector currently facing significant challenges is the not-for-profit sector, both locally and nationally. These difficulties are driven by a combination of higher wages, labour shortages, rising material costs, fewer donations, and reduced access to grant funding. Concerns around the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the viability of its funding model are also adding to the pressure.

With operating costs severely impacting margins, there is increasing pressure to enhance business practices and improve governance structures to:

- Drive efficiencies.
- Secure funding.
- Optimise service delivery.

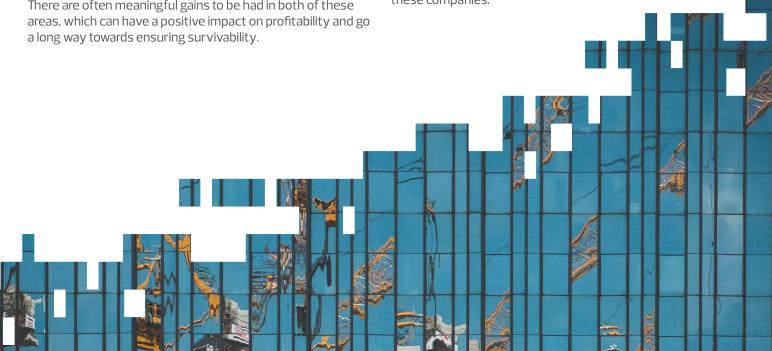
These are areas that have not always been a primary focus for non-profits. Business models must be improved, with a greater emphasis on running these organisations as businesses focussed on generating profits so that surpluses can be reinvested to sustain or expand their operations.

In some cases, mergers and acquisitions may be necessary to ensure survival.

Other sectors

Professional services firms appear to be doing well, though some specialist B2B firms have seen a slowdown with clients cutting back on non-critical outsourcing. The same is true for consulting firms that rely heavily on government contracts, with public sector outsourcing decreasing as budgets tighten and governments seek to bring more functions back in-house.

Other sectors with distressed businesses include start-ups, transport, education and childcare. High overheads, labour shortages, lack of funding, changing funding models, impacts of government legislation and debt incurred during the pandemic have caused substantial strain and led to downsizing or wind-ups of a higher proportion of these companies.



Weathering the storm

Preparation and proactivity are vital for surviving current economic conditions. While everything moves in cycles and we do expect to see past conditions rematerialise, exactly when and how this will happen is uncertain.

The most any business owner can do is take control of their own situation and do the best they can. From our perspective, this includes all of the following...

Get back to basics...and get them right!

Good business will always be good business, meaning the principles never change. This includes having:

- A clear vision and strategy.
- A profitable pricing model.
- Diligent financial practices.
- Proper cashflow management.
- Regular forecasting.
- Efficient operations.

It is important to actively track your financials rather than relying solely on your bank account balance. Staying on top of invoicing and hiring a bookkeeper or similar can help ensure that quoting, invoicing and debt collection are managed efficiently and on time.

Most importantly, budgets and forecasts must be regimented. Work with your business adviser or accountant to run scenario modelling so you know exactly what you need to do if a given situation arises.

The actions you may need to take could be:

- Making roles redundant.
- Dropping an unprofitable product or service line.
- Applying for a loan.
- Closing part of your business.
- Diversifying your client base.
- Entering safe harbour.

Budgets and forecasts are also essential for loan applications, so getting them done ahead of time allows you to gain maximum benefit from the types of insights they provide.

Good business models adjust their workforce, markets and product and service lines to align with performance and trends. Even for a small business, adopting this approach is often essential for long-term success.

Check everything twice

In times of stress, you can't rely on what has always worked for your business in the past. This includes the standard commitments you make through contracts, quotes and supplier orders.

Diligence is key, so take the time to check and double check everything before you agree to it. For construction and manufacturing companies, this could include reviewing every clause in a contract to ensure it is financially viable to pursue. For retail and hospitality businesses, this may mean revisiting order strategies to avoid overstocking products that can't be turned over.

Keep investing in your business and people

Interesting times call for innovative approaches, which means you might need to adopt a more entrepreneurial mindset in your operations.

Take a magnifying glass to every business practice and process to see if it can be improved. Look at customer feedback to understand what people are asking for. The more aware of risks and opportunities you are, the more agile you can be in how you respond.

If you're time and energy poor, you will need to explore avenues for outsourcing or automation. Understand the role that these could play in your business, so you can focus on delivering next-level customer experiences. For most businesses, you only get one shot to impress new customers — so make it count!

Lastly, don't stop developing your people. Often, it costs more to onboard a new employee with a specific skillset than it does to train an existing one. The benefits of doing this are multifaceted, with training and development often leading to higher levels of satisfaction and lower levels of staff turnover.

Change accountants if you need to

If you need more from your accountant than your tax return, and if they don't have the skills or capacity to provide it, then don't be afraid to let them go.

We don't say this to promote ourselves, but we have noticed an influx of clients who had become increasingly frustrated with their existing accounting firm due to a lack of holistic advisory services.

Rather than letting the relationship and your financial situation deteriorate, let your accountant know you need more. If they can't provide it, find a firm that can. Difficult times demand specialist skillsets, and you need to be making confident decisions because they do affect your business, family and livelihood.



Protect your assets

You can't protect your assets when you're on the brink of insolvency, so if you are running a profitable business then it's worth investigating now.

Asset protection involves reviewing how your business and personal assets are structured to ensure you're not taking unnecessary risks. For example, consider who is listed as a director of your business and who owns your family home. Not everyone needs to be a director, and doing so can be risky. Directors have financial responsibilities — even in roles like sitting on a not-for-profit board— and if a company or organisation goes into debt, they can be held personally liable. It is important to understand these responsibilities and assess whether the risk outweighs the reward.

Taking steps to protect your assets may include setting up companies, trusts or segregating personal assets from business risks. You also need to consider how you withdraw money from your company to fund your lifestyle. Tools like Division 7A loans can help manage cash flow and tax liability, but if mismanaged, can harm your business and threaten your personal assets if the business becomes insolvent.

Work with an asset protection specialist who can help you make smart, tax-effective decisions that safeguard your assets while considering all possible risks. They can also help you develop an exit plan for your business which is something that should be in place from day one. Companies are not designed to live forever — they exist for a specific purpose, at a specific time and eventually should be merged, sold, or wound up. If an exit plan is not part of your business plan it's time to create one.

Do not ignore the ATO

Not completing your lodgements or paying your tax bill won't make ATO debt disappear. While relying on tax payment plans might have been effective in the past, you're now facing credit card interest rates on overdue tax debt. Additionally, you might unintentionally set up payment plans when your business is actually insolvent which could have serious consequences.

If your business's tax debt is too high or you're at risk of defaulting on a payment plan, seek guidance from a restructuring and recovery expert. Even admitting to the ATO that you can't afford to make a payment can have future repercussions, so you will want to tread carefully.

We have had a lot of success negotiating with the tax office using the Small Business Restructuring (SBR) process. This may be something your business is eligible for too, so don't waste time getting in touch for a free initial consultation.

Choose your funding sources wisely

If your business is in a tight spot, try to get advice before tapping into personal funds or reaching out to non-bank lenders. You don't want to max out your borrowing capacity too early, because this will limit what you can do in the future.

With bank lending conditions as they are now, the go-to working capital funding solution has once again turned to non-bank lenders and they often come with steep provisions. This means hefty interest rates and personal guarantees, plus aggressive recovery action if you default on the loan.

Coulda shoulda woulda

Hindsight is a beautiful thing, and one of the first comments we often hear from business owners in financial distress is: "Why didn't I come see you sooner?"

Talking about what's happening in your business doesn't necessarily mean it's over. Just having a conversation can be a huge relief, and you may even discover that the situation isn't nearly as bad as it seems.

We see business owners time and again trying to push their luck all the way to the end. They keep trading and diminishing their assets, believing the next big job or contract or invoice payment is just around the corner.

Yet, the business owners who are successful in restructuring are those who replace hope with strategy sooner rather than later. This takes courage, but in almost every case leads to better outcomes.



Thinking about your business is a big part of ours

Know your options

If any of the following applies to your business, it's definitely time to get advice:

- Forecasting trading losses.
- Trying to get finance to cover large amounts of debt.
- Foreseeing your largest customer not renewing a contract.
- Running an ageing business with obsolete assets.
- Struggling to pay GST or super obligations on time.
- Receiving a Director Penalty Notice (DPN).

We can't stress this enough:

The earlier you get advice, the more options will be available to you.

Ideally, we want to work with you when your business still has oxygen and your relationships with suppliers and customers are still intact. That way, we can help you turn it around before it reaches the point of no return.

This often takes the form of an early restructure and can have very positive outcomes — from saving your business to allowing you to exit with financial rewards or a stronger position for future ventures.

In addition, working with our restructuring team means you can take advantage of safe harbour provisions. Safe harbour protects you from insolvent trading claims while you work through financial difficulties, without the risk of personal liability for company debts.

Small Business Restructuring

In 2021, a simplified debt restructuring process was introduced for eligible small businesses. Known as Small Business Restructuring (SBR), this has been a lifesaver for countless businesses in financial distress.

The process involves appointing a small business restructuring practitioner who helps to develop and implement a restructuring plan. This plan is designed to enable the business to continue operating while addressing its debts in a manageable way.

For a client with \$300K in outstanding debt, we may be able to negotiate a reduced debt amount (like \$120K) to be paid back in instalments over a set period. If the proposal is accepted by creditors, the business can continue trading as long as it keeps up with the repayments. To date, the ATO has voted in favour of 91% of these restructures in the 2024 financial year.

Your business is eligible for an SBR if its debt is less than \$1m and employee entitlements and lodgements are up to date. If this is not the case, we will need to explore other options.

Case study: Restructuring to save a franchise

After successfully running multiple fitness franchise locations for over a decade, Antonio found himself at a crossroads. Invoices were getting harder to pay and the company's outstanding tax debt was snowballing. Although money was still coming in, he became increasingly worried about how he was going to get on top of all the overdue payments.

In need of guidance, Antonio spoke with his local RSM Restructuring and Recovery team. The team analysed the business and its financials, and discovered that one of the locations was losing money and affecting the viability of the others.

RSM worked with Antonio to exit and close the unprofitable location, and employed the SBR process to draw a line in the sand with all of his outstanding debt. The proposal to

creditors was to pay \$0.40c in the dollar for the full debt amount, with repayments spread over 18 months.

Antonio was able to preserve his valuable franchise agreement and continue trading with his other locations. With all previous debt settled at a much lower sum than expected, he can now focus on sustaining and growing his business moving forward.

Members Voluntary Liquidation

A Members Voluntary Liquidation (MVL) is where company directors agree to liquidate the company while it's still solvent. Control of the company passes to a registered liquidator, and assets are liquidated and distributed among the shareholders once creditors have been paid.

This can be a valuable option when directors want to wind up their business in an orderly way, ensure all debts are paid and walk away with whatever is left over. MVL is structured and efficient, and generally has beneficial tax implications for the shareholders.

MVL can also be a useful option when a business is asset rich and cash poor, and creditors (such as the ATO) are pushing to get paid. In the case of a DPN, for example, appointing us as liquidators allows directors to avoid personal liability while giving us 12 months to sell assets and resolve all debts.

Case study: Turning a failing business into a profitable exit

James and Kate were long-time owners of a ranch farm. They had a significant workforce and asset base, and contracts with two companies for the supply of their meat products.

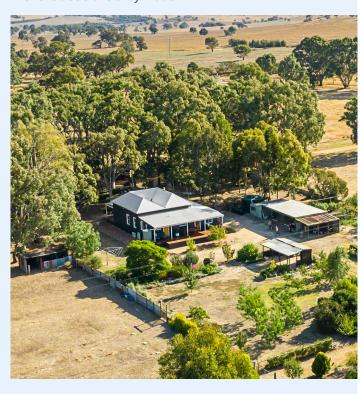
After a contract dispute with one of the companies left them in a financial hole totalling almost a million dollars, James and Kate began to investigate avenues to cover the debt — such as taking out a loan using their assets as collateral.

Wanting to test the viability of this approach, they spoke with RSM's Restructuring and Recovery team. The team assessed the business's financial position and uncovered that it was actually forecasting heavy losses in the upcoming financial year due to the loss of the disputed contract. The obsolescence of some of its main processing plant and equipment would also have required replacement. So continuing with business as usual would have left James and Kate in a deeper hole, unable to leverage their assets due to the loan and other factors.

James and Kate decided to take early action with a Members Voluntary Liquidation. This allowed their liquidator to take control of the company's assets and sell them in an orderly fashion over a 12 month period. In this period, their creditors (including the disputed contract) were unable to take enforcement action against the company.

As the assets could be sold in a structured wind down approach, rather than a fire sale scenario, the sale price achieved created a pool of funds from which to pay all creditors plus interest, and left James and Kate walking away with enough funds to take the next step in their life journey.

They occasionally wonder if they might have continued trading and sold their business assets for a higher price, but recognise the value in the cautious and proactive approach they took. They remember losing the contract dispute and facing the possibility of personal bankruptcy. Now, with a secure pool of funds and a stable future, they feel content with the decisions they made.



Dealing with personal debt after liquidation

In cases where liquidation of a company has not resolved debts that carry personal liability — such as secured loans or tax obligations — directors can become understandably stressed about what this means for their personal assets.

For lower debt amounts, informal debt agreements are generally possible and can be negotiated in such a way that the debt amount is very reasonably compromised.

When personal debt amounts are much higher than the individual's capacity to pay, we may need to explore a Personal Insolvency Agreement (PIA or Part X) or bankruptcy.

PIAs are useful when you want to retain your home and avoid bankruptcy. The process involves appointing a personal controlling trustee who proposes a binding agreement with all creditors. Repayments might be made in a lump sum (potentially with support from a lender or third party), via instalments over time, or a combination of both.

One of the key benefits of a PIA over an informal debt agreement is that it provides certainty by addressing all known and unknown creditors, preventing them from pursuing you in the future.

A PIA is not for everyone though, and when you have struggled under the weight of substantial debt for some time and are eager for a fresh start, declaring bankruptcy may actually be your best option. It can be quite rehabilitating — allowing you to draw a line in the sand between your past and future, and giving you a fresh start.

Whatever situation eventuates for you, taking a determined and controlled approach to rejuvenating or winding down a distressed business is a much more effective strategy than letting it unravel without a plan. By understanding your options and making conscious choices along the way, you honour the effort you've invested and give your business the respect it deserves.

Case study: Keeping the family home after insolvency

As a skilled software developer, Ravi was in high demand working as a freelancer. He operated as a sole trader and won significant contracts, though he frequently had trouble managing cashflow. At the end of a particularly lucrative year, he found himself with a major tax debt and no money to pay it.

Ravi had grown tired of freelancing anyway and decided to take a role at a large tech firm with a good salary. While he had intentions to pay his overdue tax amount, he wasn't sure how to do it and avoided engaging with the ATO until they threatened to force bankruptcy.

Not wanting to lose his family home and uproot his wife and daughter, Ravi sat down with the Restructuring and Recovery team at his local RSM office. The team assessed his financial position and formulated a proposal for the ATO that included Ravi keeping his home but selling all joint investments (including a property, shares, and a vehicle) and making reasonable monthly repayments over a three year period from his wages.

The proposal was accepted and the investments were sold to repay the debt. He and his wife and daughter were able to continue living in the family home, and could now look forward to their future knowing that chapter was behind them.





Think...BIG!

To emerge victorious from an economic slowdown, you must be prepared to Think Big. This means thinking and acting like industry giants in terms of how you run your business and the level of support you seek from experts.

Seeing advisers as a cost centre is short-sighted. We know this because we are able to see first-hand what makes a successful business. They are well-structured and well-advised, with a management team who understands the financial position of the company and the levers that affect its future financial performance.

As a full-service firm, we are uniquely placed to help you run your business this way. We offer a wide variety of services that account for every stage of the business lifecycle, including:

- business structuring
- asset protection
- business advisory
- accounting and tax
- audit and assurance
- fraud and forensic accounting
- IT and cyber
- succession planning
- restructuring and recovery

We are home to experienced business advisers, certified accountants, small business restructuring practitioners, registered liquidators, registered trustees and more. When it comes to getting through tough times, our business advisory and restructuring and recovery teams will often work together as this helps us achieve the best possible outcome for our clients.

Every conversation is completely confidential, and it is always up to you in how you move forward. Our job is to help you get a clear view of your business, understand the options available to achieve your goals, and implement the strategies you choose.

Be it external economic factors or internal family matters, having a trusted sounding board to guide you through both the good and bad times is invaluable.

Put simply, and whether you get it from us or not, good advice is gold.





Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following individuals for their valuable input:

Dace Harris – National Head of Business Advisory
Patrick Flanagan – Partner, Business Advisory
Peter Nicol – Partner, Business Advisory and Medical Services
Gavin Stacey – Director, Business Advisory
Nick Farr – Director, Business Advisory
Frank Lopilato – National Head of Restructuring & Recovery
Jonathon Colbran – Partner, Restructuring and Recovery
Jerome Mohen – Partner, Restructuring and Recovery
Andrew Bowcher – Partner, Restructuring and Recovery
Devika Shivadekar – Economist

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